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The President Seems Slightly Out of Touch



The most revealing aspect of the Max Hugel affair may have been the role of Ronald Reagan, which was essentially passive.



The president, it turns out, was never told about the "problem" until the night before it was "solved" by Hugel's resignation. That was the case despite the fact that the White House chief of staff, James Ba-

ker, and counsel, Fred Fielding, had been aware of the situation for at least four days and had held several discussions about it with Hugel and CIA officials.

It is true, as the White House took pains to point out, that Hugel was an appointee of CIA Director William Casey and not of the president himself. But it is equally true that he held one of the most sensitive posts in government as director of the CIA's clandestine operations. You might think Reagan would like to have known if there was trouble brewing there.

The attitude of those on the staff seems to have been that there was no need to bother the president with such a detail. And, technically, that is probably correct.

But, in one sense, this was not an isolated incident. Instead, it was another case in which the White House projected an image of a president so far removed from the nitty-gritty that you naturally wonder what Reagan does all day.

The Ernest Lefever case is another example. Throughout the weeks that controversy boiled in the Senate and the press, Ronald Reagan never met him. Apparently he was simply not curious enough to personally meet with the man he had nominated to be assistant secretary of state for human rights.

The White House answer to criticism of such incidents makes some obvious sense. We have just spent four years with a president who paid entirely too much attention to detail, so much that he conveyed the impression he couldn't see the forest.

That reputation was one of the factors in Jimmy Carter's political demise.

It now seems reasonable to wonder, however, whether the new administration has not overcompensated for this failure in the president's predecessor by isolating him from decisions that he should properly make.

The political risk in this kind of policy lies in the possibility it will feed suspicions that Ronald Reagan is not only functioning as a chairman of the board but one who doesn't attend many of the meetings. The picture we are getting is one of the president spending an inordinate amount of time riding horseback or chopping firewood or whatever.

That image has been reinforced, moreover, by Reagan's continuing problems at his press conferences. In the first of those, when he had been in office only a few weeks, he could get away with vague answers to specific questions. Nobody expects a new president to be an instant expert on every issue; on the contrary, it is refreshing to find one who admits to human fallibility.

But that period of tolerance may be running out. The president was subjected to considerable criticism for his performance in his first press conference after his recovery from the assassination attempt, particularly on such things as his misstatement on the nature of the missiles Syria has placed in Lebanon.

Reagan is not the first president, of course, who seemed to function above the rabble. As his advisers are quick to remind everyone, Dwight D. Eisenhower ceded a great deal of authority to Sherman Adams and spent a lot of time himself playing golf. And that turned out all right.

That is true enough, but there are significant differences between the situations of the two presidents. For one thing, the issues with which Reagan is dealing seem far more pressing than did those confronting the nation 25 years ago. For another, Eisenhower had a long history of involvement in national security matters that was far more reassuring than Reagan's limited experience.

No one would suggest that Reagan isn't functioning as president or that he has delegated so much authority that he has become a figurehead. On the contrary, all of those who have worked for him and known him well over the years agree that he is insistent on making the important decisions himself. And, they also agree, he cannot always be expected to make either the predictable decision or the one his advisers recommend to him.

Politics, however, is the business of perceptions. And the president's credibility and future effectiveness can be greatly diminished if the perception that flourishes across the country is one of a president who is not keeping in touch with enough of the details.

As the reaction to the Social Security initiative showed, the voters always know whom to blame.